

# Understanding and Using Tag Questions

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*By Miriam E. Mil n Martin*

Teaching English majors in a non-native environment for over thirteen years has acquainted me with the fact that, no matter how proficient a learner might become, he will always use- when trying to get his meaning across-those constructions of the foreign language that are closer to the ones he makes use of in his mother tongue.

Therefore, in conversation, where turntaking is fast and spontaneity is the main characteristic (Tanner 1989), it is no wonder that Cuban majors of English frequently ask questions confirming their assertions with hybrids such as "That's an interesting book, no?"

The English equivalent pattern to be used in such a case is a tag question, which most grammars define as a type of question appended to a statement-an important element of everyday conversation. (Crystal 1939; Quirk 1982:37-53)

However "dispensable" tag questions may be, the construction is not taught to our students, other than as a grammar point. Yet the existence of utterances like the one above, or others like: "You've never been abroad, do you?"; or "The consonantal sound /p/ belongs with the occlusives, isn't it?", are proof of the inefficacy of the approach given to the teaching of tag questions.

The cause probably rests on teachers' relying on the gradation of the textbooks, which usually propose generalizing tag questions, only in the last units of the course.

True as it may be that the students already know the basic English tenses, the inversion of subject and verb for questions and the use of do or did for present and past simple respectively, it is also a fact that in the process, we have overlooked the sound teaching principle of mingling tenses in the above examples.

The principle at stake is the separate presentation and practice of items that a syllabus or course presents indiscriminately (Abbot et al. 1981), and the one we go against when we teach tag-question grammar together with the meanings that intonation gives tags.

Approaching the teaching and practice of tag questions with that principle in mind, it occurred to me that I could ensure my students' learning to use the structure beyond a simple understanding of the grammar.

Having analyzed all the aspects involved in the formation of a tag question, I decided to approach the issue by:

1. Practicing the formation of the pattern in the tense introduced by the syllabus or course in each unit.
2. Separating the introduction and practice of the meanings achieved through intonation.

3. Separating the presentation and practice of the formation of the tag: Affirmative statement + negative tag; negative statement + affirmative tag.
4. Supplementing practice material from real life situations (classroom or school situations).

To implement my approach I still had to decide whether to teach falling intonation for confirmation, or rising intonation for real questions first. Though it might have interfered with the focus on the common rising intonation of yes/no questions, I chose to start with the meaning conveyed by falling intonation, as it seemed that asking for confirmation to keep a conversation going was more beneficial to communication. Besides, some functions that should be taught rather early in the course called for asking for confirmation: asking someone's, opinion, clarifying something, agreeing or disagreeing, for which tag questions provide the medium.

I decided to supplement practice material from real life situations since the syllabae or textbooks usually propose series of sentences for the students to reproduce or provide with a tag with the common hindrance of a mixture of tenses.

Again, it is quite more encouraging to speak about one's personal experiences than about the best picture, even a good picture! Thus, as Roscoe, Janice and Helga were my students at the time, I used their names and facts about them and asked my students to do the same in our practice.

*Roscoe is a nice boy, isn't he?  
Yes, he's nice and good-looking.  
Helga is a pretty girl, isn't she?  
Yes, she's pretty and intelligent.  
Janice is absent today, isn't she?  
Yes, she's ill.*

They repeated these and similar minidiologues, and created their own, with my help whenever necessary:

*Our campus is nice, isn't it?  
Yes, it's full of trees and birds.  
The coffee in the cafeteria is terrible, isn't it?  
Yes, it's awful.*

Dialogues like the above ones were my students' first attempts to use the pattern. Still working with falling intonation for confirmation, we tried the construction negative statement + affirmative tag after three units of practicing that of the affirmative statement + negative tag.

After having worked with both constructions together for some units, I introduced the second meaning: Real questions through rising intonation. The students were overjoyed! Did it mean they did not have to change affirmative or negative elements into non-assertive ones for the common yes/no question any more?

They were warned against making excessive use of the pattern in either meaning to avoid sounding insecure or aggressive, respectively, if they asked too many falling intonation tags or

rising intonation tags. And as they were already aware of the objective of my experiment-which they regarded as their own-the students were really cooperative.

I would hate to seem too proud of my results. I have approached tag questions in this way for two courses and the outcome of my work has been equally satisfactory in both. Though some mistakes persist-mainly in the realm of intonation and specifically due to the interference of our native Cuban-Spanish accent-the mixing of tenses is not frequent and, more significantly, students monitor themselves and one another for accuracy.

It is also very rewarding to listen to them use the pattern now and then, far more frequently than I remember I used to as a student, and without having substituted it for Yes/No questions, or the above mentioned hybrid.

I do not think that the approach that has worked for my students should be the only one on this issue. In fact, I intend to reverse the order of the practice of the different meanings in the forthcoming course, to verify its effectiveness.

Indeed, each group should be taught what it needs to learn, and it is the teacher's task to make it easier for them, and more efficient.

The importance of the pattern in everyday communication makes this procedure more than worth the effort.

**Miriam E. Mil n Martin** is a teacher of English at the University of Oriente in Santiago, Cuba.

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